



BOOK REVIEW

Popol Vuh, A Retelling

By Ilan Stavans

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By Rudolph C. Rysler

My first taste of the Popol Vuh occurred in the late 1990s when I yearned to know about the beginning of all things. This desire is not an unusual desire of one steeped in the origin stories of Pacific Northwest (US) Indian tribes and my ancestors from the Waskarini, Cree, and Oneida, the Suabians, and of course, the Orkney Islands. All had stories of their origins, and in many ways, they were similar—from the darkness of an empty sky and the waters nearby. I noticed that some of my ancestors referred to the sacred corn, beans, and squash, and I had learned earlier in life that these life-giving sources of nourishment originated in the lands of the México and the Mayan-speaking peoples. And particularly the Cree, Oneida, and Waskarini ancestors remembered origin stories when the earth had no human beings but became populated by various “peoples” such as the turtle, muskrat, bear, deer, and many others. Why I asked, were these origin stories similar?

The Popol Vuh, translated by Dennis Tedlock in the 1970s and beyond, had been published in 1996 and seemed to promise new perspectives on the origins of things that may match my ancestors’ tellings. I was not disappointed. As Tedlock writes, the Quiche lords consulted their

book as they met in council, and their name for that book was Popol Vuh or “Council Book.” Tedlock had traveled to the lands of the Quiche in Guatemala’s highlands, searching for what turned out to be a Daykeeper by the name of Andres Xiloj—a keeper of sacred knowledge. Xiloj took Tedlock as an apprentice, teaching him the “language” according to the “rhythms of the Mayan Calendar” critical to comprehending the Popol Vuh text that had been rendered into the printed word in the 16th century by four unnamed Daykeepers. Tedlock spent nine years, including his 1977-76 apprenticeship searching the meanings contained in the Popul Vuh. Though sometimes difficult to follow due to the twists and turns of the Popul Vuh’s way of thinking, his translation revealed a story that showed me that the origin of humanity as the Quiche conceived of that beginning was essentially the same as the stories from far to the north. The Popul Vuh, I decided, was the grandmother origin story that was spread throughout the hemisphere over three thousand years. The origins of the Quiche and their ancestors were the origins of my ancestors.

The Popol Vuh, the Quiché Book of Creation (or more literally, Book of the People and used a Book of Council), has been translated by numerous

scholars seeking the full meaning of this Book that was first written down in about 1550 rooted until that time in the oral tradition of the Quiché. This Book of the Daykeepers served as a guide to Quiche ancestors extending 3000 years into the past. The oldest surviving written account of the Popol Vuh (c. 1701) by Dominican friar Francisco Ximénez was rendered into a manuscript transcribed in K'iche' with a side column translation in Spanish. The Popol Vuh is one of the very few books of the Quiché surviving from the Spanish deliberate burning and destruction of texts.

Translated from the Quiché language, Father Francisco Ximénez (1666 – c.1729), a Dominican priest was known for his conservation of knowledge about the Quiché culture, prepared two versions of the Popol Vuh composed as the Manuscript of Chichicastenango. He offered himself as the “discoverer of the text” and not the author. His first translation was a verbatim, literal rendering into the Spanish language from the Quiché in which the original text had been written from the middle 1500s. His second rendering. Ximénez’s transcription-translation of the Popol Vuh was retrieved from obscurity by Adrián Recinos at the Newberry Library (Chicago) in 1941.

My early reading of the Popol Vuh with Tedlock’s translation was sparked anew by the publication of Ilan Stavans’ 2020 translation titled, “Popol Vuh, A Retelling.” I was eager to see how another researcher interpreted the Popol Vuh.

Reading the Popol Vuh in Stavans’ writing informs the reader that the ancient text and the

ancient animal symbols can be rendered as a poetic narrative that can be more accessible to 21st-century readers.

Stavans succeeds in retelling the Popol Vuh as a “modern story” in the language of a fantasy and not a historical or cultural narrative. Stavans writes that he had an “inescapable urge to retell the Popol Vuh for a contemporary readership.” And in this goal, he succeeds. Readers familiar with Star Wars, and as Stavans notes, those who are readers of C.S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia* and J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* sagas will find the “retelling” of the Popol Vuh cast as a great mythic adventure that carries hints of values, ideas, and instructions. As a rendering of the Popol Vuh, an historical commentary on change, time, and space, Stavans chooses, however, to avoid. Stavans’ adaptation skates over the role of dreams, omens, and rhythms of the Mayan calendar—so fundamental to the Popol Vuh. In its original form, this Book overcomes as Quiche Daykeepers will say, limitations such as nearsightedness. It’s an *ilbal*, a “seeing instrument” or a “place to see” to know distant and future events. Daykeepers who traveled Chicago’s Newberry Library to see the Popol Vuh in its original text would refer to it as “The Light That Came from Across the Sea.” Since the Book tells of events that occurred before the first sunrise—a time when grandmothers and grandfathers could not be seen and when stones contained the spiritual helpers of deities in the forests all remained in the shadows.

Stavans’ understanding of Popol Vuh recognizes that the Book is a story of events that take place in space and in time. Still, he assigns the story to the status of a “mythology of nature”—a story of “mythological events and ecological elements.”

To the Daykeeper, the Popol Vuh gives the ability to see deep into the past and measure and comprehend future events. Stavans floats over the surface story and limits the reader's ability to see. He has transformed an instrument of power and knowledge into a mythic account that bears little resemblance to the meaning of the Book. Stavans' "retelling" transforms this ancient Book and its meaning into a television serial, as a story of "strange animals" and gods involved in a great fantasy.

If "fantasy" is what the reader seeks, Stavans has provided that in structure and style that charms and entertains. The problem is that he has stripped the text of its meaning—of its vision "before the sunrise" and the "Dawn of Life." As a Daykeeper may pray before approaching an ancient shrine:

Make my guilt vanish,
Heart of Sky, Heart of Earth;
do me a favor,

give me strength, give me courage
in my heart, in my head,
since you are my mountain and my plain;
may there be no falsehood and no stain,
and may this reading of the Popol Vuh
come out clear as dawn,
and may the sifting of ancient times
be complete in my heart, in my head;
and make my guilt vanish,
my grandmothers, grandfathers,
and however many souls of the dead there may be,
you who speak with the Heart of Sky and Earth,
may all of you together give strength
to the reading I have undertaken.

Daykeeper Andres Xiloj, Tedlock reports, was convinced that if only one knew how to read it perfectly— "borrowing the knowledge of the day lords," the Popol Vuh would reveal truths to the four corners of the world. It is to this purpose the Book of Council has served human beings for all time. For amusement, one will read Popol Vuh, A Retelling, and not benefit from "seeing."

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Rudolph Ryser has worked in the field of Indian Affairs for more than thirty-five years as a writer, researcher and Indian rights advocate. Rudolph has taught widely on historical trauma, cultural models of addictions recovery, diabetes and culture, foods and medicine. He is the leading architect of the discipline of Fourth World Geopolitics--the study and practice of the social, economic, political

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